

OXFORD

MAGAZINE

No. 452 Noughth Week Trinity Term 2023

The Proctorial system represents, in miniature, the best of Oxford traditions: and it is significantly different from the role of Cambridge's Proctors. With a principal function of guarding and regulating student interests across the collegiate University, this time-honoured structure is part of our all-important arrangement of organisational checks and balances. It is democratically representative in its elected appointments and through a sharing of roles among three academics with a spread of backgrounds. Over the years it acquaints – often starting from scratch – an enlarging body of academics with the central administrative and governance mechanisms underpinning the University; with the benefit of this brief 'secondment' they go on to deploy their new expertise and knowledge in their colleges and departments.

But perhaps their most tangible and influential role comes in their Demitting Orations published in the *Gazette*. Each year these Orations represent a form of annual audit of the University from a uniquely comprehensive, detached and fresh-eyed perspective. In the most recent Orations in March the Junior Proctor put it this way:

"A crucial aspect of our roles as Proctors is as scrutineers of the University, its governance and its operations....Our roles as Proctors and the Assessor have, I hope, been less as interlopers and more as interlocutors, as intermediaries speaking across committees, divisions and the collegiate University – enabling communication and discourse."

The Senior Proctor went further:

"Serving on Council and its committees, we get to see the University through the eyes of both the centre and the different constituencies of the University and, at first hand, the work of the talented and dedicated individuals who serve on these com-

THE SORELY NEEDED BALM

mittees, complemented by the wisdom and expertise of our external members: individuals working together for the collective good. However, this is tempered with frustration with the apparent lack of understanding shown by some committees about the processes and people they provide services or policy for, which may reflect on their membership. This leads to the widening gap between the central University and the colleges, divisions and departments who fulfil the University's

mission, helping us to maintain our attractiveness as an excellent place to study, teach and research."

Searching through this year's Orations, was there any detectable theme common to the three individually distinctive presentations?

"I believe more effort early on to induct, prepare and communicate expectations reaps subsequent rewards. Welfare, education and communication work to support better progress."

I have seen such occasions more generally in the University's governance this year, where a policy or initiative might progress far without enough consideration of who will ultimately be executing the work. Such behaviour can lead to wasted time, wasted opportunity and antagonism. Though the wider University is a colossal entity, there is very little that cannot be improved by better communication and more empathy. I have also seen all parts of the wider University pick up the slack associated with a problem, but over-reliance by others on such continued practice, without intervening to offer further support, brings resentment and entrenchment. Too often matters only get addressed when they have become crises." (Richard Earl, Department of Mathematics, Assessor)

"When navigating the rocky terrain of the post-pandemic ecology, our decision-making must be informed by pedagogical considerations and underpinned by our core objectives of excellence in teaching, learning and research. When these important decisions are being made, we must ensure that the right voices,

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...and much more

the voices of academics – those at the forefront of teaching and assessment – are not only in the room but also in sufficient number.” (Linda Flores, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Junior Proctor)

“If the content, language and perceived attitudes of the communicator and their communications do not match those of the target audience, then confusion, errors, exclusion and hurt feelings can result. We see this in our staff disengaging from issues on the one hand and then, on the other hand, in the toxic debates and tensions on pay, pensions and working conditions; these are an expression of the frustrations experienced by those who just want to do their very best at their jobs, in their research and teaching, but feel constantly shackled by demands placed upon them. We have the very best of minds in Oxford – our intellectual capital – yet many feel misled and underappreciated, working in an environment where the operational infrastructure appears to lack transparency and accountability. A new focus and dialogue is needed, with more understanding by everyone, and this can start with clear and direct communication, using inclusive and objective language. As a scientist, I am obliged to communicate complex ideas to the lay public; in fact it is a requirement of my grants. As a University we need to work together to remove the noise, to achieve the clarity in our communications to see the path ahead and – importantly – help everyone understand how this will be funded. We have huge challenges ahead and budgets to set that will require the pain to be shared; there needs to be honest communication to ensure that everyone understands this, and also that those who shout loudest don’t hog all the resource.” (Jane Mellor, Department of Biochemistry, Senior Proctor)

In the choice of words alone there may be a collective message. On the one hand words such as resentment, toxic debates, antagonism, disengagement, exclusion and hurt feelings are indicators of a possible underlying malaise among University staff. But on the other hand the three Proctors seem to point to the remedy; clear and direct communication, honest communication, the right voices, the voices of academics...in the room, better communication and more empathy

Or as Jane Mellor put it;

“Our reserves of resilience and compassion” are under strain (especially after Covid). *“For many, our new Vice-Chancellor’s acknowledgment of this is the balm that was sorely needed; thank you, Irene”*

* * *

A number of specific issues were drawn to our attention, as follows. Collectively they highlight the importance of gaining the support of staff in bringing in new policies or projects and the first requirement in achieving this: adequate and timely information.

“...perhaps those tasked with looking after our estate took their eye off the ball, choosing to focus on the shiny and new at the expense of less glamorous activities. We all recognise the need to become more efficient, leaner and better at what we do. Disappointingly, over the past year we have encountered individuals who actively block change and hold the University back. On the other hand, we have seen some really good practice, and come across individuals who have engaged proactively to change systems and processes to make them fit for purpose and, importantly, make our jobs easier, often without recognition. We see vast amounts of resource being spent by the centre to define, yet again, where the inefficiencies and problems lie. But it is not clear if this resource is yielding results or represents value for money. There is a real lack of transparency and accountability here.

Maybe the evidence suggests there are simpler and less costly solutions. Too often we hear that IT systems and programs are hard-wired and thus too difficult to change, or that one system is unable to talk to a second, meaning that data has to be inputted manually. If we got these basics right, we would all be more efficient. Do we need to spend millions to discover this? Services such as IT, HR and Finance are reproduced many times over the University, in the centre, colleges, departments and divisional offices. If the University is to move away from its siloed departmental provision, to services provided by the centre, then it has to ensure that it puts in place services that can be trusted to deliver. The scepticism of many outside the centre regarding such change is based on past experience of provision from the centre simply not delivering.”

“Language and communication are so important in this area [addressing the toll on reserves of resilience and compassion]: we are not machines with ‘levers that can be pulled’ to teach and support more students, churn out more internationally competitive research, do more public engagement, be entrepreneurial, and innovate new courses and ways of teaching. We all want Oxford to remain the place of excellence, academic freedom and light-touch, devolved governance that drew many of us here in the first place, but if we carry on as we have over the past few years, this will be lost and we will become also-rans on the international stage. We can see this beginning to happen with the Research Excellence Framework – many think it is just a bureaucratic exercise and we are somehow better than this, but the reality is that for many parts of the University, we are ‘not as good as we think we are’. We need to ask why and find solutions without developing a blame culture, demonising particular parts of the University or thinking it can be solved by imposing yet more processes on us – or on those who support us in this effort – to ensure compliance. Moving forward, we need to allow staff at all levels to thrive: an institution is only as good as its people; in fact, it is those whose roles are often overlooked, under-resourced and poorly remunerated who underpin our success. Research is a creative process, and this also contributes to excellent teaching. It needs mental time and space that many of my colleagues feel is being robbed of them by extraneous ‘noise’, interfering with their capacity for creative thought.”

“I wishto reflect on what welfare might mean in this University. The very word ‘welfare’ can be polarising; some immediately associate it with a molly-coddling culture of less resilient students – others, especially if they worked in welfare during the pandemic, have examples to hand of more traumatic cases. Headline figures can often relate to more extreme cases and in any case data cannot capture instances that do not become welfare cases.”

“Iwonder what matters and actions the audience members, particularly those new to Oxford, associate with Congregation. The Proctors and Assessor take seriously the fact that our demission orations are for the attention of Congregation and we have even had to fend off University committees pushing for a preview. I am too young to remember Congregation not awarding Thatcher an honorary degree but was here for discussion of John Hood’s governance proposals and outside for the al fresco Congregation on pensions five years ago. So it has been a shame this year to see how easily Congregation’s rules can sometimes be abused and many people’s time wasted. The power and worth of Congregation was clear at those previous meetings; it would be good for all of us if meetings of Congregation were seen as addressing matters of unalloyed significance, bringing into much-needed focus the attention of the wider University.”

T.J.H

The New Roundheads

JONATHAN SUMPTION

Over the past two decades, a number of intolerant ideologies have swept through the worlds of learning, literature and the visual and performing arts. This evening I am concerned with one of them. Its essential feature is the diversion of academic disciplines to a task for which they are usually ill-suited, namely the reform of modern society so as to redress perceived inequalities, notably of race. In the course of this exercise, some of these disciplines have been discredited and others distorted, generally with little or no factual basis. The study of history is particularly vulnerable. Most historical scholarship involves judicious selection from a vast and usually incomplete body of material. It is possible to create an entirely false narrative without actually lying, by exaggeration and tendentious selection. The major threat to historical integrity in selection comes when the criteria of selection are derived from a modern ideological agenda. What we have been witnessing is the reshaping of the history of the last four centuries to serve as a weapon in current political disputes. Objectivity and truth have been the main casualties.

I want to start with a well-known example which perfectly illustrates the problem. In November 2022, the Wellcome Collection, a museum dedicated to the history of medicine, announced the closure of *Medicine Man*, an exhibition of artefacts relating to the history of medicine collected by its founder Sir Henry Wellcome. The decision to close this exhibition was itself perfectly reasonable. As a collector, Sir Henry Wellcome was a bit of a magpie, and the exhibition, which was fifteen years old, was rather fusty. However, what mainly attracted attention was the statement which the curators published on Twitter that they had closed it because it “perpetuates a version of medical history that is based on racist, sexist and ableist theories and language.” To understand this statement, it is necessary to go back two and a half years to an earlier announcement from the Wellcome Collection in June 2020 in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Under the heading “Anti-Blackness and Racism”, it declared that the Collection was built on “racist and patriarchal narratives” and that institutional racism was enmeshed within its fabric. It went on to suggest that not only the Wellcome Collection but museums generally were “built on a foundation of white supremacy” and had replicated “racist behaviours” for decades. The curators declared their intention of “continually ask[ing] questions about power, representation and the civic role of public museums” and focussing on the “lived experiences of those who have been silenced, erased and ignored.”

What does all that mean? It is palpably untrue that medical history, as presented in *Medicine Man*, was based on racist, sexist and ableist theories. Certainly, museums reflect the historical outlook of those who assembled their collections and their successors who curated them. In Britain, they were generally able-bodied white males. But museums do not, just by virtue of that fact, replicate racist behaviours. Nor does our culture silence or ignore

non-European experience where it is relevant. I think that what the curators meant to say was that the exhibition treated medicine as a western science of which non-white groups were passive consumers with no worthwhile contribution of their own. This, they felt, implied a hierarchy of cultures in which the west was superior to the rest, a notion which was offensive to non-western racial groups.

The Wellcome Collection is not alone. The Museum Association, which represents museums generally, has called on them to “address colonial structures and approaches to all areas of museum work.” At about the same time as the curators of the Wellcome Collection published their June 2020 statement, the Director of the Royal Botanical Garden at Kew, probably the world’s leading institution dedicated to plant science, issued a similar statement on its behalf. He began with the usual cringing confession that its history “shamefully draws from a legacy that has deep roots in colonialism and racism”. The only fact cited to support this surprising assertion is that during the nineteenth century, the Royal Botanical Garden studied the movement of plants around the British Empire as part of its world-wide botanical mission. This is said to have made the Botanical Garden at Kew a “beacon of privilege and exploitation”. The director went on to declare that Kew would in future decolonise its collections and “tackle structural racism in plant and fungal science”, with a view to achieving “transformative and societal change” in modern Britain. The inference is that merely by having existed and collected information and specimens in the great age of imperialism Kew Gardens is in some way complicit in modern inequalities in Britain. Finally this. “There is no acceptable neutral position on this subject [racial injustice]; to stay silent is to be complicit”. This is a particularly odd thing to say. It seems obvious that one can be an excellent plant scientist and an outstanding plant historian without taking any view at all on racial injustice.

These statements, and there are many others of the same kind, have certain points in common.

The first is that they are proposing a political program for the modern day, supported by a highly selective approach to the past which sees everything through the prism of race. Race becomes the supremely important phenomenon, masking every other aspect of a complex culture. Racial politics provide the framework of values by which every institution concerned with the past is to be judged. There are many important factors in the way that human societies develop. Race is only one of them and not necessarily the most important. Any serious commentator on the current state of historical studies ought to welcome attempts to present aspects of history which have previously been ignored or marginalised. That includes the story of ethnic minorities and non-European societies. But it does not mean that the whole of Britain’s modern history should be viewed through their eyes. It does not mean that the role of slavery or empire in Britain’s eco-

conomic, cultural and social history should be exaggerated beyond recognition. And it does not mean that current political priorities should determine how we understand the past.

The second thing that these statements by various museums have in common, is that they lose sight of the broader evolution of human history. Benjamin Disraeli once observed in response to an anti-semitic taunt in the House of Commons, that “while the ancestors of the right honourable gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the temple of Solomon.” Victorian elites undoubtedly regarded their own civilisation as superior to others. This has been a universal habit of humanity ever since the Greek city-states and the ancient dynasties of China dismissed the whole of the rest of the world as barbarians. If these prejudices are ever justified, it is only for short periods of time, two or three centuries at the most. Empires and cultures are transient. They have their periods of power and creativity, before fading away. Medicine is as good an example as any. White males have not always dominated medical science. There have been periods when major contributions came from non-European cultures: Chinese, Indian and Arab in particular. Historians have not ignored this. Great books have been written about it, almost all in European languages. The 26 volumes of the *History of Science and Technology in China* by the Cambridge scientist and historian Joseph Needham is one of the most remarkable works ever written on the multicultural origins of modern science. But this should not blind us to the fact that the three centuries before the Second World War were the European centuries, in medicine as in other sciences. With very few exceptions, such as the use of some medicinal plants, indigenous non-Europeans contributed very little. If one looks across a broader chronological range, the picture is very different. But calls for the decolonisation of academic disciplines do not do that. They generally focus narrowly on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and seek to debunk one of the few indisputable facts about that period, namely that it was a period in which cultural and scientific developments fundamental to the modern world almost all emanated from Europe or from European settlements elsewhere.

Museums have been among the most visible and vocal exponents of the current calls for decolonisation. But it has affected every intellectual discipline concerned with the past and many which are not. In this university, the Faculty of Classics is one of many which have made public statements about the legacy of colonialism. It declares that the origins of the Oxford classics degree are “embedded in a nineteenth century colonial context”. This is said to be because of what the document calls “civilisational thinking”, in other words the view that there is a hierarchy of cultures with the West at the top. The document goes on to point out that when classics became a distinct school at Oxford at the beginning of the nineteenth century, British elites viewed the classical world as a superior civilisation and adopted classics as a guarantee of the standing of their own civilisation. All this is true, but it had nothing to do with colonialism or empire. It originated in humanist educational ideals of the sixteenth century which were common to all of Europe including countries with no colonial tradition. The same educational ideals were prominent, for example, in Germany, whose universities were major centres of classical philology, archaeol-

ogy and history long before Germany developed colonial aspirations of its own.

Decolonisation has been demanded of many other disciplines which were never in any meaningful sense colonised: the visual arts, music, literature, philosophy and even the physical sciences and mathematics. The only connection between these fields of study and Europe’s imperial past is that the West achieved a dominant position in them during the imperial era. One does not have to go far from this building to encounter some remarkable examples. The decolonisation statement of the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division of this university reveals the same obsession with race and the same tendentious attempt to portray racism as a perennial theme of Western thinking. It begins by seeking to discredit its own subject by referring to the scientific racism of the nineteenth century, which posited a racial hierarchy identified by physiological characteristics, a view which no serious scientist has entertained for many decades and which has no current relevance to the subject. It goes on to identify science with empire by pointing to the Victorians’ collection of material samples and botanical specimens across the globe. Moving to the present day, it calls for a study of deep-rooted racial biases in digital technology, artificial intelligence and machine learning. One would not have thought that the subject was capable of racial bias. But as the statement proceeds, it becomes clear that the object is to redefine knowledge itself, in a way which artificially devalues Western science. “As we work towards greater inclusion”, it declares, “we need to have a broader understanding of what constitutes ‘scientific knowledge’”. Among other things, this is said to involve “challenging western-centric ideas of ‘objectivity’, ‘expertise’ and ‘merit’”, and “removing structural hierarchies that privilege certain knowledge and certain peoples over others.” It is clear that the authors of this document believe that empirical scientific methods as they have been conceived in the West since the seventeenth century as just one of a number of equally valid approaches to the subject, and that it racially biased to prefer it to any other.

There are two basic ideas behind statements like these. One is about the nature of historical truth. The other is about inherited collective guilt.

The repeated emphasis on challenging the structures of power, which one sees in the statements of the Wellcome Collection and the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division of this university is an echo of the teaching of postmodernist philosophers like Michel Foucault. Foucault was the leading exponent of the idea that objective truth is unattainable, because truth is by nature subjective. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (published in 1969), he taught that the structures of power within a society determine what is generally perceived to be true. Few people outside the discipline of philosophy have read Foucault’s opaque works. But many more have read Edward Said’s influential book *Orientalism*, published in 1978, which applied Foucault’s ideas to the legacy of the great European empires. Said argued that powerful groups control the intellectual framework within which ideas are discussed, and determines what constitutes knowledge. Historical truth, he claimed, is not discovered. It is made by historians, in accordance with unconscious prejudices moulded by the power structures of society. The power structures which had enabled Europeans to dominate much of the world between the eight-

eenth and the twentieth centuries had generated a view of the world based on a hierarchy of civilisations which patronised and marginalised non-European peoples. According to Said this frame of mind persisted. It led modern scholars to construct a narrative of the past which treated non-Western races as representing an earlier stage of human evolution, less valid than the more developed experience of the modern West. The task of the historian was therefore to deconstruct the hegemonist West and substitute a different power structure in which other people's truth could be acknowledged.

These ideas have been extremely influential among many people who know nothing of their origin and have never heard of Foucault or Said. In 2015 the organisers of the campaign to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes from its niche outside Oriel College issued a pamphlet entitled *Our Aims*. Their purpose, it said, was to suppress the frame of mind which the statue symbolised. It was to "remedy the highly selective narrative of traditional academia—which frames the West as sole producers of universal knowledge—by integrating subjugated and local epistemologies..." When, three years ago, the Director of the Pitt-Rivers Museum decided to ask a Maasai shaman to divine which objects from the Maasai collections of the museum had been stolen from their original owners and to repatriate the items that he designated, she was giving practical effect to the idea that modern historical and archaeological methods are no more valid as a route to truth than mystical divination employed in other cultures. If truth is subjective, then every ethnic group may have its own truth, and the whole concept of objective knowledge disappears.

Let me now turn to inherited collective guilt. The argument is that if people once suffered what we now regard as injustice at the hands of our forebears, we owe it to their descendants to make that good. One thing that the study of history teaches us is that injustice as we conceive it has been the lot of much of humanity at most times. Much of the history of the world is a history of the brutal exercise of force: tyrannies, wars, massacres, persecutions. Historically, most people at most times have abhorred democracy, rejected political and religious tolerance and regarded the very idea of gender or racial equality as ridiculous. What should we do about this now that we think differently?

Logically, perhaps, humanity at large ought to atone for its own past. But at that level of generality, the gesture would be largely meaningless. After all, injustice is indiscriminately distributed across the centuries and continents. It would deprive what is really a political program of its political force. So the call for atonement for heritable guilt is directed against some specific sector of humanity, say white people, the British or Oxford University. This is not only irrational. It is also morally repellent. Historically, the idea that particular groups bear an inherited responsibility for some past iniquity has been the basis of ugly prejudices and vicious persecutions.

The desire to visit moral responsibility for the past on some identifiable sector of mankind has generally focussed selectively on Britain's involvement with empire and slavery. No one would today defend the worst moments of the British Empire: the rapacity of the East India Company before its political and military operations were brought under government control at the end of the eighteenth century; the Opium wars; the Amritsar mas-

sacre, and so on. But it is a gross offence against historical honesty to take all the worst features of some historical phenomenon and then serve them up as if they were the whole. Throughout history, empire and armed migration have been part of the dynamic of human development. The values which we regard as characteristic of Western civilisation were born in the societies of ancient Greece and Rome both of which were founded on slavery and imperial conquest. The bloody conquests of the Arabs in the seventh and eighth centuries gave rise to a remarkable middle eastern civilisation, far more impressive than anything to be found in Europe in the same period. The rise of modern Japan as a technical and industrial giant had its origin in the forcible opening up of the "hermit isle" in the 1850s by the American navy. The European colonial empires between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries had the same catalytic effect on the world. The British Empire was created and sustained by force or the threat of it, as all empires, indeed all governments, ultimately are. It denied self-determination to its indigenous populations until its final years. Yet it was also a remarkable administrative and cultural phenomenon. Those who governed it were guided by a variety of motives, patriotic, economic, military, geopolitical, evangelical. But at least in the last century and a half of the empire's existence they were also infused with a strong streak of humanitarianism and idealism. The empire suppressed a variety of barbarous practises which it would have been convenient to tolerate, including cannibalism, *suttee*, human sacrifice and slavery. It brought spectacular economic development, creating global networks of shipping, railways and telegraph and injecting capital and enterprise into local economies. It brought relative peace, honest administration and the rule of law to much of the world. It built great world cities: Mumbai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sydney.

Our forebears believed that good government was better than self-government, and that trade and economic development were better than cultural autarky. These are unfashionable views now, but there is nothing inherently disreputable about them. Would sub-Saharan Africa be better off today if Europeans had left its peoples to their own devices? Would modern India be better off if it had not inherited its subcontinental identity and economic infrastructure from Britain? Would the world as a whole be a better place if Europeans had never settled in the Americas or Australia? I do not think so.

Slavery was once among the most ancient and persistent institutions of mankind. The Arabs and the indigenous rulers of precolonial Africa were probably the greatest slavers who ever existed. The involvement of the Atlantic nations is, by comparison, relatively recent. It began with the Portuguese in the fifteenth century and the Spanish in the sixteenth. Britain was the last country to take to slave trading and the first country to reject it. In societies imbued by Christian moral teaching, slavery was only defensible on the footing that black people were not really human. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the rise of evangelical Christianity in Britain led to a major movement of moral revulsion against that idea. In 1772, the Court of King's Bench declared that the English common law did not recognise property in another human being. The slave trade was criminalised throughout the British Empire in 1807, earlier than any other country except Denmark. Slavery itself was abolished by statute throughout the empire in 1834. For the

remainder of the nineteenth century, Britain deployed its considerable diplomatic and naval power in suppressing the practice, initially on the Atlantic coasts of Africa, then in the African interior and the Indian ocean. The polemics surrounding Britain's involvement in the slave trade concentrate on its participation in the seventeenth and eighteenth century slave trade while ignoring or belittling its involvement in the suppression of the trade. Yet historically the latter was very much more significant. The seventeenth and eighteenth century slave trade was in line with the conventional moral values of the age. But its suppression was revolutionary. It went against the tide of opinion elsewhere in Europe and against Britain's economic interest. The global consequences were immense. The sheer size and global reach of Britain's colonial empire was the biggest single factor in the suppression of a practice that had existed across the world from time immemorial.

To many people, all this is beside the point. Their real concern is with the present, and with those aspects of the past which serve their arguments about the present. Their anger against the past is provoked by a small number of totemic issues, of which race and empire are the most sensitive. These issues are totemic because the position which one takes on them is seen as a symbolic statement of which side one is on in the broader battle to shape the future. When an issue acquires totemic status, the actual facts disappear from view. The issue becomes a mere occasion for political self-expression. Hence the vandalism of statues and the campaigns to rename streets and buildings. The statue of Edward Colston in Bristol was erected to honour his foundation of schools, hospitals and almshouses in Bristol. Tobias Rustat's monument in Jesus College Cambridge was put there to mark his generous gifts to his college. All Souls College Library was once named after Christopher Codrington to mark his funding of one of Oxford's great institutions of learning. All three individuals had some involvement in slavery, but none of these memorials and dedications commemorated that aspect of their lives. The objection to them suffers from the same partial vision of the past as the unbalanced historical accounts of Britain's imperial record. Once a person or an institution is touched by slavery or empire, nothing else about them matters, however important or admirable. This marks the extreme point which tendentious selection can reach. David Hume is thought unworthy of commemoration by Edinburgh University because he shared the patronising indifference of his contemporaries to other races. Yet this is a fact about Hume which is of very little importance when measured against his stature as one of the intellectual giants of the eighteenth century Scottish enlightenment. In the eyes of a significant minority of the British population, mostly young, Winston Churchill has become a mere symbol of English imperialism and racism. Far more significant aspects of his life, such as his contribution to Britain's survival in the Second World War and the destruction of Nazism, are swept aside.

Does this matter? I believe that it does.

The civilisation of mankind since the seventeenth century has been based on the notion that there is such a thing as objective truth. It may be more or less difficult to identify with confidence, but it exists. In history, the difficulty in discovering the truth is due to the uneven survival of sources and to the problems of interpreting those

that we have, not to inherited prejudices or ideological mental blocks. We have traditionally built our intellectual world on the basis that we get closest to the truth by objective study of the available material, by abandoning immovable preconceptions, by logical reasoning and by willingness to engage with dissenting opinion. These are not just Western constructs. They are universal principles, which are necessary if we are to discuss controversial issues in the same language. There is no alternative route to truth dependent on different racial identities or different hierarchies of power. Yet these basic principles of rational discourse are now under challenge.

The repudiation of Britain's past in the name of a modern political agenda is currently a minority position. That much is clear from opinion surveys. But there is a serious risk that it will become the orthodoxy of the next generation. It is strong in some important groups, notably the young and politically active, and a vocal contingent in the academic world. It may not be a passing phase. The habit of reinforcing one's political instincts by adopting whatever facts suit them is too deeply ingrained in human nature. Today, it is intensified by the social media. They are a major source of information, especially for the young. But they are curated by algorithms which amplify views that already exist, suppressing nuance, balance or doubt and giving a misleading impression of a great tide of opinion when the material is often generated by a handful of fanatics.

Those who believe that knowledge and truth are mere social constructs are almost bound to end up by suppressing competing views. If what we think we know is actually no more than an artificial consensus created by power structures invisibly controlling our schools, universities, publishers and museums, then there is no point in debate. You have to change the power structures, take control of those institutions and create a new consensus. This is what is now happening. It is happening with the enthusiastic support of many of the institutions themselves. They lack the self-confidence to stand up for a rational approach to empirical research and knowledge which alone justifies their existence. I am not going to suggest that modern academic scholars on the British Empire and slavery are all determinists in the mould of Foucault and Edward Said. However, their treatment of the past often shares the three main vices of postmodernist history: tendentious selection, exaggeration and intolerance of dissent.

In 2017, this university announced its support for the "Ethics and Empire Project". Its object was to explore the moral and factual basis of the conventional hostility to empire. It provoked vocal opposition from many academics in the field. On Twitter, calls by a Professor in the English Faculty at Cambridge to shut the project down, were answered by gross personal abuse. This is the level to which in some quarters academic debate has fallen. Another opponent of the project, a professor of history at King's College London, was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying that "any attempt to create a balance sheet of the good and evil of empire can't be based on rigorous scholarship." It is rare to find a serious scholar overtly rejecting the very idea of balance in the assessment of controversial evidence. But it is not as rare as it should be. The fact that his protest was supported by 170 academics in various open letters sends a depressing message about the current state of scholarship on this issue. It also explains why scholars who dissent from the current orthodoxy

find it wise to keep quiet about it if they value their careers.

This has an impact well beyond the academic world. Every human society depends for its cohesion on a sense of collective identity. The French historian Ernest Renan, in his famous Sorbonne lecture of 1882 entitled “What is a Nation?”, argued that the solidarities which created a nation were primarily historical. Renan’s target was the ethnic nationalism and social theories preached by overt racists such as Johann Herder and Arthur Gobineau. National identity, Renan declared, did not depend on ethnic or linguistic solidarities, but on a history of collective effort, collective sacrifice and collective devotion. It depended on a consciousness of having done great things together in the past, and wanting to do more of them in future. His definition is pithier in French: “*avoir fait de grandes choses ensemble, vouloir en faire encore*”.

This brings one to the great irony of modern debates about the past. Those who claim to be the champions of ethnic minorities are seeking to undermine Britain’s past as a source of collective solidarity. They are reverting to morally questionable notions of conflicting ethnic identities which can only fragment our society, obstruct the integration of minorities and undermine any sense of community. The problem is aggravated in the case of race by a notion of hereditary moral responsibility, which requires one to recognise an entirely artificial class of modern victims defined by race. The result is to perpetuate grievances on account of past events that have no practical relevance to modern lives.

Democratic institutions only work if people accept the legitimacy of their decisions even where they disagree with them. For that to happen, they have to identify themselves with the wider society to which they belong. The fragmentation of a society’s historic identity can only hinder that process. The problem is aggravated by the intolerant and polemical tone that characterises much of what is written and spoken about Britain’s past. The great apostle of Victorian liberalism John Stuart Mill foresaw that the main threat to its survival would come not from

the authoritarian state but from the conformity imposed by public opinion. Current campaigns to vilify parts of our history are an attempt to create a new conformity, a situation in which people will not dare to express contrary opinions for fear of provoking outrage and abuse. These are symptoms of the narrowing of our intellectual world. Recently, publication of a book written by the director of the Oxford Ethics and Empire project was indefinitely “deferred” (in effect rejected) by Bloomsbury, the publisher which had commissioned it, on the ground that “public feeling” did not support its publication at the moment. This is the mentality which Mill and other apostles of liberal values dreaded.

We will never understand the past unless we recognise that human beings are light and shade and acknowledge both. Few individuals and no societies have ever been wholly good or wholly bad in any age. This mixture of darkness and light is a critical part of the process by which human societies develop. We can celebrate the achievements of our forebears as well as learning from their mistakes and iniquities. To reject what is wonderful and fascinating about humanity in favour of a monochrome view of the past, dictated by current priorities, is obsessive and fanatical. It is also very bad history.

I have entitled this lecture “The New Roundheads”, because the object of these campaigns against historical objectivity is essentially destructive. What their partisans have in common with the original roundheads of seventeenth century England is a deadly combination of dogmatic intolerance and sanctimonious philistinism. The earlier Roundheads ultimately failed in their attempt to produce a uniform culture in England according to their own narrow vision of virtue. A civilised society should wish the same fate upon their modern successors.

This is a transcript of the inaugural lecture of the Pharos Lectures series delivered at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford on 27 February 2023. The recording and conversation with John Simpson can be found on the Pharos Lectures YouTube channel here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiM1EYIQgzg>

NOTICE

The Editors of the *Oxford Magazine* regret that they cannot publish any material submitted to them anonymously. If the author requests publication on the basis that the author’s name and university address be withheld from the readership, the Editors will consider the reasons given and in their discretion may publish on that basis; otherwise the material will be returned to the author.

Congregation or Wellington Square: where is the University's 'centre'

G.R.EVANS

Every year the Oration of the Proctors and Assessor adds a readable and memorable *Supplement* to a late March *Gazette* in which they record their impressions and some of their concerns. 'A crucial aspect of our roles as Proctors is as scrutineers of the University, its governance and its operations'¹ said the outgoing Assessor this year. Though pleased to find himself speaking to 'a sizeable audience', he did not assume that it 'knew what the Assessor does'. He added that a Proctorial demitting Oration is 'for the attention of Congregation'. He was concerned about 'what matters and actions the audience members, particularly those new to Oxford, associate with Congregation'.

These Proctors and the Assessor took their role seriously, commenting that they 'even had to fend off University committees pushing for a preview'. That is surely an indication of the importance of their joint Oration as an entirely independent annual 'school report' on the University's governance and management to the University's Congregation parents.

The Assessor had a novel point to make. He wanted to see Congregation 'addressing matters of unalloyed significance, bringing into much-needed focus the attention of the wider University'. The Assessor argued that Congregation ought to use its power for things of importance to the wider University. He drew a contrast between discussion of John Hood's governance proposals and other more recent past episodes when the 'power and worth of Congregation was clear' and recent occasions when he suggested that there had been abuse of Congregation's 'rules' and 'many people's time wasted'. He did not particularize. Of course there may be much such activity taking the time of the Proctors and Wellington Square which leaves no footprint in the historical record in the *Gazette*.

The Senior Proctor had her own comments to make on matters of governance and its complex relationships with the University's Administration. She mentioned 'frustration with the apparent lack of understanding shown by some committees about the processes and people they provide services or policy for, which may reflect on their membership'. 'Disappointingly, over the past year we have encountered individuals who actively block change and hold the University back.' She had also seen 'really good practice, and come across individuals who have engaged proactively to change systems and processes to make them fit for purpose'. She recognised that 'the centre' works hard to identify 'where the inefficiencies and problems lie'. She put these down to untidy duplication of services in 'colleges, departments and divisional offices'. But 'the scepticism of many outside the centre regarding such change is based on past experience of provision from the centre simply not delivering'. There is an echo of a 'One Oxford' notion here but also a glimpse of the reality of the difficulties of making a system so complex and

decentralised work at all. Getting clear the role of Congregation as Oxford's sovereign body could not be more urgent here.

* * *

The Assessor's suggestion of Congregation 'abuses' prompted me to look at what the *Gazette* records as coming to Congregation during this Proctorial year, for that is where the University's historical record is made public. In the current academic year it seems to cover the normal range, fixed by the constitutional requirements. There are many instances of consent being requested routinely as required for allocations of space under Statute XVI, A, 4, elections and awards of Honorary Degrees and Degrees by Resolution. There were particular needs to be met requiring formal Congregation consent, for example a request for consent to the changes to Statute XIV in connection with the EJRA Review (22 and 29 September, 6, 13 and 20 October); the Congregation Resolution on the *Oxford Magazine* (27 October); removal of Benet's Hall as a PPH (10, 17 and 24 November); various amendments to wording needed to reflect the accession of Charles III in the Schedule to Council (1 and 8 December and 12, 19 January); the Admission of the Vice-Chancellor (12 January).

There seems no sign of 'abuses' there but possible candidates for such criticism seem to be clustered in Trinity Term 2022: a Congregation Resolution on the war in Ukraine (*Gazette*, 21 and 28 April, 2022); a Council Resolution to establish a new degree; approval of appointment of new Vice-Chancellor (*Gazette*, 16 June); and particularly perhaps a Congregation Question (*Gazette*, 9, 16 and 23 June).

The Question concerned a matter which has become urgent with the forthcoming passing of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act:

'We believe the University's Harassment Policy and its policy on "Using social media: Guidance for managers and employees on social media use" (the "policies") prohibit speech that is lawful and thereby breach the University's legal duty to take such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure freedom of speech within the law. This is not a matter of mere legal technicality. These policies frustrate academic freedom – the lifeblood of this University – and harm academic careers' (Gazette, 9 June, 2022).

The Council's reply to the Question (*Gazette*, 23 June) included an extract from the University's statement on Freedom of Speech, which 'allows students, teachers and researchers to become better acquainted with the variety of beliefs, theories and opinions in the world'. However, it said, there was a balancing requirement:

'In formulating its statutes, policies and procedures, the Univer-

sity must also take into account other factors, such as its duties to staff and students, other obligations under the Convention, its public sector equality duties, and the risk of vicarious liability for the acts of its staff.’

So:

‘The University’s policies reflect its at times conflicting obligations by requiring standards of behaviour of its members, distinguishing between the freedom to explore and express ideas and the manner in which such ideas are expressed, reflecting the issues to be balanced in the University’s approach to concerns that are raised, and making clear the University’s commitment to freedom of speech.’

The Council added that good manners are needed. ‘The University believes that a culture of free, open and robust discussion can be achieved only if all concerned engage critically but courteously with each other’.

Getting this right will now become a matter of meeting new requirements for the University.² This takes us back to the importance of the Proctorial Oration (Cambridge’s Proctors do not give one) in giving a frank yearly picture of the state of the University’s health in the conduct of its affairs. They do not hesitate to speak personally about their impressions and concerns on matters currently topical. Freedom of speech and protection from hurt feelings have both become inseparable from the difficulty that avoiding causing offence may interfere with the necessary freedom of academics to discuss topics thus made controversial. It is also necessary to be able to detach oneself from a view of one’s identity as fixing a position. As the Senior Proctor put it:

‘Much of the “noise” we experience in the University is semantic and cultural, making it difficult for us to communicate effectively. Individuals have diverse world views and perspectives, and great care needs to be taken in conveying ideas and information to them,’

and:

‘If the content, language and perceived attitudes of the communicator and their communications do not match those of the target audience, then confusion, errors, exclusion and hurt feelings can result.’

This links with a topic raised by the Junior Proctor in her own Oration. The Council published its Race Equality Strategy in September 2022.³ The Junior Proctor especially welcomed the appointment of Professor Tim Soutphommasane as Chief Diversity Officer (CDO). His special task will be to ‘coordinate’ its ‘delivery’. An aspect not expressly covered in the *Strategy* itself found a place in the Junior Proctor’s Oration. She is, she said, ‘a Pacific Islander from Guam – a space which has, within living memory, experienced the violence of colonisation and wartime occupation’.

She drew attention to a recent exhibition held in the Weston Gallery with the subtitle ‘Empire, exploitation and everyday racism’. This, she said, ‘examined the role certain historical publications played in the construction of narratives of discrimination and oppression’, tackling ‘difficult and sensitive topics such as colonialism, race, gender, sexuality, disability and identity’. ‘These things matter’, she said. ‘History matters. Historicity also matters. We cannot erase our history, but we can rethink it,

reconsider it and engage with it in new and meaningful ways’.

That can make a history including slavery and colonisation hard to teach simply as a description of events and their putative causes. It requires an *apologia*. But to whom, how, when and why? The whole problem is complicated by the recognition that a sense of personal identity focussed on attributes arguably open to discrimination may encourage individuals to feel in need of the protections of the University’s EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) policy? (EDI provides reading lists of materials relevant to its work.)⁴

How can Congregation make use of the Oration’s insights? The administrative structure and the governance structure in which Congregation is sovereign run largely in parallel. The Equality and Diversity Unit sits within Human Resources in the Professional Services and University Administration, reporting to the Registrar. Its work is overseen by the Equality and Diversity Panel which reports to the Education and Personnel Committees of Council and there are Advisory Groups in Disability and LGBT+ and numerous Networks.⁵ Each Division has an ‘academic lead’ on EDI⁶ and those Committees of Council are academic committees but the structures which ensure that Congregation hears from them are imperfect. Any reference of proposals to Congregation would come from the Council, but it might not be a requirement that it should do so. Here is an instance of the complexity of the relationship between the (administrative) ‘centre’ and the many sub-sets of decision-making in the University touched on by the Senior Proctor in her Oration.

Congregation can insist on being heard on a matter only through a Congregation Resolution or a Congregation Question. It may not be easy to define by either route the shape of the thoroughgoing consideration which will be needed when the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill becomes law. But this is surely an opportunity for some hard thinking about ways of avoiding another failure to frame more clearly the working of the relationship between the University’s governance and administration.

1. Gazette, Supplement, 23 March.

2. See my article in *Oxford Magazine* 8th Week, Hilary Term.

3. <https://edu.web.ox.ac.uk/race-equality-strategy>

4. <https://rl.talis.com/3/oxford/lists/ADACDADE-B803-AD2D-A850-E6BB93100E7B.html>

5. <https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/networks>.

6. <https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/networks-and-contacts>

A Note from Buenos Aires

PART ONE

BEN BOLLIG

It has become almost a cliché to say that theatre is a mirror that a society holds up to itself. Ariel Dorfman's play about Latin American dictatorships, *Death and the Maiden*, ends with a physical mirror descending from the arch. For the outsider, though, theatre can be a window onto the reality of a country that is otherwise hard to understand from its press, public life, or politics.

I've found this to be especially the case in Argentina: despite recurring economic and political crisis, Buenos Aires in particular has an intense and energetic theatre scene that feeds into and off the country's long-standing and widely recognised literary culture. In recent years, cinema and television also contribute, with crossover and cross-fertilization of writers, directors and actors between page, stage and screen. Visions of violent pasts and dystopian futures mix and inform each other in many of the works I have seen recently. Yet there is seemingly unquenchable optimism about the power and value of theatre itself.

Mariano Pensotti is best known internationally for his tryptic of films *El público* (*The Audience*), which tell three different sets of stories about the audience of a play that we, the viewers, never see. This fascination with how stories are told, with how identities are formed around convincing fictions and implausible realities, informs his latest play, *Los años* (*The Years*, Teatro San Martín, Buenos Aires). Pensotti writes and directs, but the work of the other members of the Grupo Marea (including musician Diego Vainer and designer Mariana Tirante) plays a vital role in this conceptually ambitious yet emotional engaging work.

Los años tells two stories, 30 years apart, set mostly in the same house, two iterations of which stand side-by-side on stage. The house stage-right is from 2020, stage-left from 2050, and in both is Manuel. As a 30-year old he is played by Paco Gorri; aged 60, Marcelo Subiotto, familiar to Netflix fans from the recent hit *Community Squad*. Other characters are doubled and transition between the timeframes with subtle changes of costume, voice or manner. The screened-off upstairs is used for projections as well as bedroom scenes that are partly obscured. This allows the story to be told following multiple vectors, at times simultaneously, at times blurring the moments.

Young Manuel is an aspiring filmmaker, about to become a father for the first time in a relationship that is soon to break down. Manuel senior is a jaded university film lecturer, moderately renowned for making various versions of the same documentary, invited back from Germany to Buenos Aires for a retrospective of his work. In 2020, while working on research about extant Argentine copies of European buildings that no longer exist – a transparent symbol for what Roberto Schwartz once called Latin America's "ideas out of place" – he spies a young orphan in an abandoned apartment. On a whim,

he follows and films him, and the encounter changes both their lives.

Pensotti's theatre and films are deeply rooted in local and international artistic traditions. There are obvious Brechtian motifs here (the narrator who announces her role as both Manuel's partner and daughter; the use of projection; the multiple self-references), but Stoppard (*Arcadia*, *Rock 'n' Roll*) also comes to mind. Closer to home, Rafael Spregelburd is the most obvious reference, not just in the use of a revolving stage, but also in the narrator's recurring observations about the Egyptians' invention of time and attitude towards death.

The thirty-years-hence trope offers much scope for cheap laughs, but Pensotti eschews the most obvious ones. There is a running joke about rewilding and vegetarianism; another about political change, as a fringe party proposing recolonization by Spain has become mainstream in 2050. References to the "pandemics", plural, raise nervous laughter. In 2050, Argentina has become a country of refuge for a wave of Dutch immigration, caused by rising sea levels and the influence of Queen Máxima.

Pensotti's great skill, in short, is to anticipate the clichés that come with the subject matter – bourgeois guilt about inequality, absent parents, Argentina's politics and its relationship to Europe, ageing and disappointment – to entertain them, joke about them, but then move forward intellectually and emotionally. I will be thinking and talking about *Los años* for a long time to come.

Precoz (*Precocious*, Dumont 4040 theatre, Buenos Aires) is based on Ariana Harwicz's novel of the same name; her *Matate amor*, translated into English as *Die, My Love* was longlisted for the International Booker in 2017 and is soon to be filmed in a Martin Scorsese production. Harwicz's speciality is dysfunctional, self- or mutually-destructive relationships, often set in ruined or out of the way places (rural France, a post-apocalyptic Argentina), written in a prose at once serpentine and elliptical. *Precoz* is the story of the obsessive, co-dependent relationship between a mother and her precocious adolescent son, set in a dystopian near-future in which some aspects of society function (schools, police) and others have disappeared.

I must confess to never really enjoying the novel, and to doubts about its ability to transfer to the stage. Director Lorena Vega and adapter Juan Ignacio Fernández strip the work to its essentials, with just the two leads on an almost bare stage with minimal lighting effects and discreet extradiegetic music. Sections of the novel's action are rendered in monologues by the actors, but where the play really takes flight is in the interaction between the two.

Valeria Lois as the mother perfectly treads the line between madness and love, at once protective and provocative. Tomás Wicz as the son is a model of expressive control – cheeky, sulky, threatening, vulnerable – all the more im-

pressive as he plays a character possibly ten years younger than himself. By boiling the novel down, and helped by the immediacy of theatre (I was seated four rows back, dead centre, disconcertingly close to the actors' eyeline), which makes it harder to dislike two characters who often frustrate and annoy, Vega and her cast create sympathy and understanding, foregrounding the issues of mental health, marginalization, and obsessive love, as well as a certain Beckettian grandeur to this short but tragic play.

The early finish gives us time to take in another play. Pablo Iglesias's *La receta más secreta* (*The Most Secret Recipe*, Microteatro Palermo Soho, Buenos Aires) is a "microplay" about a man obsessed with secret recipes, in this case of a popular cola drink. He kidnaps an intruder he has found in his house thinking that spies from the corporation mean him ill. The reality is rather more banal, as we quickly find out in the piece's comic conclusion.

The concept of the Microtheatre is itself worth considering: a trendy central bar and patio area, off which are six very small flat-floored performance spaces, each seating twenty or so spectators. Plays are fifteen minutes long and performed multiple times over the course of the evening. In theory, you can see six short works in an evening, with dinner and drinks in between.

It's clearly very popular – Iglesias's play is multiply sold-out that evening, and when we miss our designated time after my friend's bike wheel is stolen we have to wait an hour for the next slot. Iglesias packs in the laughs and his three performers bring a lot of energy to the close confines of what might once have been a small hotel room. For those with shorter attention spans, or for whom two or three hours watching one play is a commitment too far, this is a perfect solution.

Inferno, written, directed by and starring Rafael Spregelburd, is on its second run in Buenos Aires (Teatro Astros), having premiered in Austria (in German translation) in 2016 and returned to Argentina last year. Spregelburd has spoken about his work as rejecting standard models of realism but without turning away from pressing social and political questions. The term "theatre of disintegration" has been used about his plays.

Like his heptalogy riffing on Hieronymus Bosch's depiction of the Seven Deadly Sins, *Inferno* takes a painting by Bosch (*The Garden of Earthly Delights*) and spins an intricate, multi-layered, occasionally bewildering network of tales. It opens with Felipe, played by Spregelburd himself, visited in mysterious fashion by Marlene and Berenice, apparently two Jehovah's Witnesses, offering him perhaps salvation or perhaps, as they put it, the worst plan of his life.

Hell, the visitors tell Felipe, has been abolished as a place – beneath the earth, populated by demons – by Papal decree. Instead, it is all around us, in language, in the silences between words, in our dreams and as we wake. To summarise the plot from there is to give a massive spoiler, but one could say we follow a series of characters and situations linked by the repressive state violence of the late 1970s. These stories reside within each other, or haunt individual characters, in the manner of Cronenberg's *Existenz* or Christopher Nolan's *Inception*. For Felipe these are nightmares or visions, in which he learns the lessons that will allow him to gain each one of the virtues, starting with charity, and ending with fortitude.

At two hours-plus with no interval, the demands on the performers are extraordinary. The cast of four take multiple roles, requiring different accents, various costumes and states of undress, and massive levels of energy. There is, as in all Spregelburd's work, a lot of shouting and no little frenetic action; but in the quiet moments the cast, Pilar Gamboa especially, transmit a subtle emotional intensity that is often more moving and effective than the wilder histrionics.

Inferno is, among other things, a feast for the eyes and ears. Santiago Badillo's stage design is perfectly chaotic and, as the play progresses, increasingly meaningful. Spregelburd spends much of the play in his underpants, but costumes are beautifully designed and clearly symbolic, including a striking reversible suit jacket put to good use by Violeta Urtizberea. Even a particular bespoke cushion gets a loud laugh. Nicolás Varchausky provides live music while doubling as a comic extra and occasional stagehand.

Like all of Spregelburd's work, *Inferno* is dense in ideas – about language, memory, violence and redemption. Each canto has enough material for a full-scale play, even if not all of it makes total sense on first viewing. But in the final stages, as we work towards the stunning conclusion, theatre takes over from text – or to rework Julio Cortázar's metaphor, *Inferno* wins by knockout when already up on points.

Perhaps it was the heat – though the Astros is a smart, modern and very well air-conditioned theatre – but it took a good half hour for my heart rate to return to normal. That visceral effect, the ability of a performance *physically* to move the body of the viewer, is pure theatre, and the ultimate triumph of Spregelburd's play.

Rafael Spregelburd will be in conversation (in Spanish), via Zoom, at St Catherine's College JCR on Thursday 4 May from 5.15pm, with a screening of a recording of Inferno beforehand, from 2.30pm (also in Spanish).

Foreign News

It started as a paragraph of foreign news
that was hard to find on an inside page.
We disregarded it until it flew
like a bird out of Asia to beyond our imagining.

We thought it would pass before the weather changed
or at the latest by the end of April.
But it remained in the here-and-now as the world
became a daily *purgatorio*.

Some people missed the polyphony of airports.
Aviators missed the clouds
and because everyone was gone
the town fox on walkabout stopped to nose around.

The pigeons abandoned Piccadilly,
Dover turned its back on Picardy.
Another day was cancelled behind the thick walls
of Spain, in the bell towers of Italy.

We began to keep measurements in our hearts,
sidestepped when we saw an old friend coming,
noticed the return of blackbird, sparrow and dove
and seven Sundays in a week.

We stayed home, locked doors, drew the curtains
because that was what the oracular speaker told us to do.
No more than ten could bury the dead.
The five stages of grief were down to one.

Reading Pessoa on a Flight from Lisbon

Between Finisterre and the Bay of Biscay
the stillness of flight is a mystery.
A white cloud passes while I'm reading Pessoa.
The page is open on *Solemn Over Fertile Country* –
but that's Ricardo Reis, another prince of sadness
and saudade from the land of old cathedrals.

I turn to the metres of *The Keeper of Sheep*,
then a poem in which the King of Portugal appears.
This poet has *more souls than one*,
souls washed in the rain of Lisbon.
I close a page, open another:
Pessoa the mystic is waiting there,

so he and I travel on trusting our guides,
mechanical power and gravity's pull –
and just as the engine's voice goes deep,
roars out a hymn to *the sorrowful universe*,
we are told to prepare for the long descent;
the balancing act, the illusion of stealth.

One Hundred Years of Solitude

(On rereading Marquez's epic in lockdown)

It was a treasure kept for years on the bedside locker.
Too many pages to fit in my coat pocket.
Years ago on a summer holiday in the Renaissance towns
of Italy I kept it with me for the length of the journey.
I am holding it in a photograph taken in Verona.
It's there in the bag at my feet as I pose at Dante's tomb.
At the beach resort it was buried in sand but rose again.
A book of anecdotes, a labyrinth of dynasties,
of metaphors in a metaphorical story.
I am reading it once more but not in halcyon weather.

GERARD SMYTH

Gerard Smyth was born and lives in Dublin. He has published ten collections of poetry, the most recent of which are *The Sundays of Eternity* and *A Song of Elsewhere* (both Dedalus Press). He is co-editor, with Pat Boran, of *If Ever You Go: A Map of Dublin in Poetry and Song* (Dedalus Press) which was Dublin's One City One Book in 2014.
See also www.gerardsmyth.com

Chief Inspector Maigret

Has no cellphone, never swears,
except, perhaps, when he stubs his toe,
off camera. He cogitates,
sucks at his pipe, seldom lights it.
He has time for old ladies in lace,
good time girls and déjeuner.

The success rate is constant, fantasy:
sad, sometimes. A better class of killer
haunts the Boulevard Huysmans, the Pont Neuf.
He scarcely fits in his Citroën
as it clatters along the cobbles;
nimble enough in size twelve brogues.

Beware bullies, bosses, misogynists,
this impersonation holds us safe
in the Paris of our minds. We are better
because he exists, even though he doesn't.
I am tired of hard men and women,
cowards all. God grant us style and grace
as we go under.

Unkillable

Is how I saw Ann, she who knew few limits,
sailed the Bay of Biscay, meditated
in company with The Buddha.

Everyone caught her attention,
from the postman steeped in Wittgenstein
to waifs and strays in winter streets.

Pots of tea appeared at 4 a.m.
washed down with Beckett's poems.
The au pairs left screaming, came back as friends.

Tragedy fell like a beaded cardigan
draped on a hat stand in the corridor.
The floor was a lino chess set.

What will be. What we cannot change,
what shakes like an earth quake in Margate.
You have left, Ann. My god how you arrived.

PETER PEGNALL

Peter Peggall has published seven collections of poetry and been writer in residence in many places, as well as a visiting poet at Lancaster, Sussex, Leeds and Coleraine Universities. He is the director and founder of initiatives including The Brighton Festival, South Hill Park Arts Centre, The Belfry Arts Centre in North Norfolk and *A Casa dos Poetas*, an international festival in Silves.

Erstwhile railway woes

DAVID PALFREYMAN

In the 1860s a Town-Gown skirmish occurred – the former's Council wanted to welcome the GWR proposal to locate its carriage-works in the City while the latter wanted to avoid any further connection with the railway industry (Oxford having been linked to Paddington in 1844, but, naturally, undergraduates were forbidden to use this escape route to the flesh-pots of London). Equally naturally Gown prevailed and the works went to Swindon, not least because anyway the line into Oxford was subject to serious flooding (a problem solved only in 2015).

An exasperated trades-man wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* on 7th June 1865 signing himself as Plebeian and complaining of the 'aristocratic view' taken by Professor Goldwin Smith of the University. GS had expressed grave concerns for the 'moral character' of the undergraduates posed by 'the danger' arising from contact with the 'workmen' the carriage-works would bring to the City. Plebeian pointedly noted that 'some hold that one of England's greatest dangers arises from the isolation of the classes' and that GS 'is well known as an advanced Liberal' (per-

haps what later might have been called a Champagne Socialist!).

GS had spoken of Oxford's extreme quietness as one of its greatest charms but Plebeian comments scathingly: 'This quietness is to those who have leisure and means, delightful; but, in the midst of this 'deep silence' the townspeople find it very difficult to obtain a living, and naturally seek to increase their trade'. The letter writer was later identified as J.S. Edgar, on the staff of J.S. Parker, the local bookseller.

As we move deeper into the C21 it seems, however, more likely to be Town opposing Gown's plans for the expansion of the latest industrial craze as the area between the Wolvercote and Peartree roundabouts is prepared for bio-tech laboratories and high-tech offices.

(With acknowledgement to Laurence Waters, '*Railways of Oxford*' (2020), in which Plebeian's letter is reproduced.)

Sabbath Song of the Shepherd

The Sabbath day is here!
Alone upon the open fell
I hear once more the morning bell.
The sky is still and clear.

I kneel and say a prayer
Of pain and grief for what has been,
And sense that others, now unseen,
Are kneeling with me there.

The sky is still and clear.
It seems so full, as if about
To burst and spill its fullness out.
The Sabbath day is here!

(Translated, in *tempore* COVID-19, by David Cram)

Schäfers Sonntagslied

Das ist der Tag des Herrn!
Ich bin allein auf weiter Flur,
Noch eine Morgenglocke nur!
Nun Stille nah und fern!

Anbetend knie' ich hier.
O süßes Graun! Geheimes Wehn!
Als knieten viele ungesehn
Und beteten mit mir.

Der Himmel, nah und fern,
Er ist so klar und feierlich,
So ganz, als wollt' er öffnen sich.
Das ist der Tag des Herrn!

LUDWIG UHLAND (1787-1862)

David Cram is an emeritus fellow of Jesus College.

The wild West?

Sir- It is a pity that Prof. Dorling's analyses (*Oxford Magazine*, No. 451, 8th Week, HT 2023) ignore the parts of Oxford which lie west of the rail tracks, as appears to also be the case for many of the City's planners.

Botley, North Hinksey, and Cumnor residents who have depended on the Botley Road to get in and out of the bus and rail stations and the city will be the major victims of the planned bus gates: traffic closed elsewhere will pour into the Botley Road.

Why are there no limits to car traffic on the Botley Road? Because of the Westgate, which is also not mentioned in Prof. Dorling's article. The Westgate is a major magnet for cars – particularly on the weekends.

Why have the authorities not stopped parking at the Westgate? Because they have an interest in the shopping mall's doing well (think of the tax in-take), meaning they have put profit before public health & environmental wellbeing for those West of the tracks. The authorities reportedly allowed the mall's developers to set parking rates without any City or County Council oversight on these, which means that using park and ride (as is the case for all other activities in Oxford) is not worthwhile for the mall's customers.

TO THE EDITOR

Also, the Botley Road acts as a major offloading of traffic from the A34, apparently with the priorities from the Highways Authority overriding planners, and so traffic from and to the motorway is given priority to that of local residents. Backups on the Westway all the way to the Eynsham road have become a regular feature of life in the West.

It does not help that administratively parts of Botley and North Hinksey fall within the Vale of the Whitehorse and not Oxford, so planners on both sides can pretend that those territories are located in Siberia.... and freeze them out of their attention.

The now 'forced' closure of the Botley Road because of the Network Rail works on the bridge at the station has had a double effect: on the one hand it shows that traffic through the Botley Road can be stopped. But it also underlines – alas – that the proposals laid out above are correct: closing the Botley Road has postponed the activation of the bus gates Prof Dorling is so happy about, showing that closing traffic with those is a proposal benefitting East Oxford can't be done with the West closed also. And the East wins will sacrifice the West once the bridge is redone.

Yours Sincerely
RAFAEL RAMÍREZ
Green Templeton College

REVIEWS

Substantial and unsubstantial pageant

Daisy Dunn, *Not Far From Brideshead: Oxford Between the Wars*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 2022. £20.



Not Far From Brideshead is a highly readable and entertaining book. I'd better try and explain the title. 'Brideshead' is short-hand for Oxford in a decadent state, where no academic work is done, the diet is mainly plovers' eggs, one is almost perpetually intoxicated, there are occasional forays to country houses in bull-nosed Morrisies, the undergraduates wear 'Oxford bags' (in which you have to take two steps forward until you start to move) and the whole scene is bathed in golden light. Dons are on the irrelevant periphery.



Oxford Bags. *Punch*. 22 April 1925.

It exists mainly in the 'twenties, but in shadowy form it keeps getting revived – to the despair of wokies who want to transform undergraduate life into something completely different. Daisy Dunn does deal with this *Brideshead*, but she is more interested in a less unsubstantial Oxford – where dons have their place and there is continuity of academic life and achievement. The trouble with undergraduates is that they are only here for three or four years. Looking back, Waugh and his friends saw the brief life there as 'an unsubstantial pageant' 'of unreal things.' The dons saw undergraduate life as 'watery and transient'.

Daisy Dunn is a classical scholar, so she is drawn to classical studies in Oxford, dominated by three dons: Maurice Bowra, Gilbert Murray and Eric Dodds. To continue questioning the title: scientific readers might find themselves asking 'what has happened to science between the wars?' I'm sure my friend Jack Morrell would take a dim view of this, as the author of *Sci-*

ence at Oxford, 1914-1939 (1997). There were a number of distinguished scientists, including Churchill's special scientific advisor, Lord Cherwell, 'The Prof', who was once heard to say, 'It is more important to know about the properties of chlorine than the improprieties of Claudius'. He must have been annoyed when the wife of the Warden of All Souls said to him, 'Don't worry professor, anyone who has a first in Classics could get up science in a fortnight.'

Dunn provides a good deal of information, much of it new to me – although I knew all about the Railway Club, because Roy Harrod used to reminisce to me about it, almost with tears in his eyes. There's vast bibliography – although it does not include *Oxford 1919-1939: Un creuset intellectuel ou les métamorphoses d'une génération*, Edited by Françoise du Sorbier (1991). There are 38 pages of footnotes. Since Dunn knows about classical literature first hand her study avoids falling into shallow gossip – although there is enough of that to keep the entertainment going. I particularly like the story about a scholar who rammed a Thucydides down a wild boar's throat on Boars Hill.

What is interesting is the way in which she shows that far from being confined to a picturesque enclave Oxford thinkers did attempt to be relevant, to relate what they were doing to the wider world, and especially the threat of Nazi Germany. Classical Greece was interrogated to see what it could say to the modern politics and culture. Murray was particularly committed, and became chairman of the League of Nations Union. The shock of the First World War meant that the survivors felt the need to give some thought to collective salvation. Dunn does not deal with it, but there are parallels with the attempts of Matthew Arnold and others, in an earlier Oxford generation, to apply the uplifting lessons of Hellenism to contemporary life.

Dodds had a somewhat different view, because he was interested in the occult, and wrote about the irrationalism of the early Greeks. His inaugural makes an important statement on how to treat the past, which we should continue to bear in mind:

'Too often we unconsciously identify a past thinker with ourselves, and distort his thoughts to make him the mouthpiece of our own pre-conceptions; or else unconsciously identifying him with our opponents, we belabour him with gusto, serene in the assured knowledge that he cannot hit back. I think such distortions of the past in the interest of the present to be a kind of trahison de clercs – though it is a treachery which we can never be quite certain of avoiding, since we commit it for the most part without our own knowledge.'

Dodds's great friend was Louis Mac-

Neice (Boyce in *Autumn Sequel*), and he took the view that there was another Greece apart from the sweetness and light of Hellenism:

*The Glory that was Greece: put it in a syllabus, grade it
Page by page
To train the mind or even to point a moral
For the present age:
Models of logic and lucidity, dignity, sanity,
The golden mean between opposing ills
Though there were exceptions of course but only exceptions –
The bloody Bacchanals on the Thracian hills.
(Autumn Journal, IX)*

No wonder he can't relate to them:

*And how one can imagine oneself among them
I do not know;
It was all so unimaginably different
And all so long ago. (Autumn Journal, IX)*

Bowra is major figure, heartbroken he did not become the Regius Professor of Greek, possibly because a half-submerged anti-semitism floated about Oxford. Linked with his homosexuality one can see he might have been out of the running. He is one of the *monstres sacrés* of Oxford, and influenced many undergraduates – notably Kenneth Clark, who transmitted something of the Bowra aura in *Civilization*. When he became Warden of Wadham College T.S. Eliot wrote a satirical verse:

*Mr. Maurice Bowra
Gets sourer and sourer,
Having been in a hurry
To succeed Gilbert Murray
And is now (poor soul) at the bottom:
I.e. Warden of Wadham.*

Another of the monsters was 'Sligger' Urquhart, with whom I have dealt in my review of Stephen Goldings's *Oxford University on Mont Blanc* (*Oxford Magazine*, No. 446).

There is a good brief chapter on Garsington Manor, which was a picturesque adjunct to university life, and associated with many luminaries, including T.S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, D.H. Lawrence, L.P. Hartley, Virginia Woolf and lesser luminaries, including Thomas Wade Earp. He is supposed (questionably though) to be the origin of the useful word twerp. For me it's all the day before yesterday, because Lord David Cecil was a visitor there, and was still lecturing when I was an undergraduate. Bowra also frequented Garsington, and was the Warden of Wadham when I applied for a Fellowship. He asked me questions during the interview, but before I could answer he answered. Ian Donaldson said to me that they ought to have elected him to the Fellowship. In the end Terry Eagleton was elected.

Garsington played an important part in resisting the sometimes mindless chauvinism visible during the First World War, and Philip Morrell urged the case for Conscientious Objectors. Another local hospitable house was Herbert Asquith's The Wharf, Sutton Courtenay, a nice Arts and Crafts building, designed by Walter Cave – who also worked at Somerville College.



Wharf House, Sutton Courtenay, with Herbert Asquith's Rolls Royce.

So far as I am aware no one has ever pointed that Cambridge did not have its Garsington – although Rupert Brooke's Old Vicarage, Grantchester is a sort of pale and minor substitute. What impact this has on the larger scheme of things I don't know. Cambridge did not have its Boars Hill either, and all that it involved: Robert Bridges, Gilbert Murray, John Masefield, Arthur Evans, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden and Vera Brittain.

There is chapter on Birmingham (Mordor), since that is where Dodds was Professor before becoming Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, and where he was associated with MacNeice, Auden and Henry Yorke ('Henry Green'). It is nice that Dunn quotes MacNeice's 'Snow' in full – written in Birmingham, and one of the most beautiful poems of the twentieth century. It's a pity that Mason College, where MacNeice had to hear 'Homer in a Dudley accent', has been demolished.

We encounter a very full cast of characters, but some, inevitably are missing. What about Edward James, Betjeman's first publisher, and a major patron of Surrealist art? What about Robert Gathorne Hardy? What about Father D'Arcy (owner of *objets D'Arcy*)? What about George Alfred Kolkorst? There is a nice selection of images, although I should have liked to see one of the Hypocrites Club, which was in seedy premises near Folly Bridge, and, at the other end of the spectrum, the Uffizi Society.



A fancy-dress party at the Hypocrites Club. The figure in the foreground looking like Lawrence of Arabia is probably E.E. Evans-Pritchard, who went on to become a distinguished anthropologist.



The Uffizi Society, 1921. Anthony Eden (with a moustache) is in the middle of the front row. To his left is David Cecil. Chips Channon second row 1st right.

Homosexuality is ubiquitous in Dunn's study, and one is reminded of what Lord Marchmain's mistress Cara says in *Brideshead Revisited*:

'It is a kind of love that comes to children before they know its meaning. In England it come when you are almost men. I think I like that. It is better to have that kind of love for another boy than for a girl.' (chapter 1)

When the older generations are considered the story stretches way into the nineteenth century. Gilbert Murray's wife Mary Henrietta was the daughter of Rosalind Howard and George Howard, 9th Earl of Carlisle. Rosalind was a friend of the Pre-Raphaelites, and was portrayed as a 'stunner' by Rossetti.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rosalind Howard as a 'stunner'.

The Howards owned Castle Howard – which stood in for Brideshead Castle in two film versions. Walter Pater is not mentioned, but his shadow had an impact on the cavortings of the young aesthetes.

The undergraduates did not always think well of the dons; Bowra is supposedly depicted as Mr. Samgrass in *Brideshead Revisited* and 'Sligger' as Silly in Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time*. Here is MacNeice on the subject in *The Strings are False*:

'When I think of Oxford dons I see a Walspurgisnacht, a zoo-scraggy-necked baldheads in gown and hood looking like marabou storks, giant turtles reaching for a glass of port with infinitely weary flippers, sad chimpanzees, codfish, washing blown out on a line. Timid with pimples or boisterous with triple chins. Their wit and themselves had been kept too long; the squibs were damp, the cigars were dust, the champagne was flat.'

Ouch!

At the end Dunn says, 'Like the Greeks, the British people had seen – through the progress of science and medicine – the birth of the age of rationalism. But they had also begun to retreat from it.' Discuss. Through the ages there has always been retreat from rationalism. One thinks of Thomas Browne's *Vulgar Errors* (1646), say (also called *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*), challenging and refuting the common errors and superstitions of his age – although, as MacNeice observes in *Autumn Sequel* (1953), 'the more than learned man believed in witches.' In *Four Quartets* Eliot talks about haruspicy and other irrationalities:

*To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits,
To report the behaviour of the sea monster,
Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,
Observe disease in signatures, evoke
Biography from the wrinkles of the palm
And tragedy from fingers; release omens
By sortilege, or tea leaves, riddle the inevitable
With playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams
Or barbituric acids, or dissect
The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors –
To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams;
all these are usual
Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press:
And always will be, some of them especially
When there is distress of nations and perplexity
Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the
Edgware Road. ('The Dry Salvages')*



Broad Street in 1892. 45, where Yeats lodged, is further up.

It's not really part of Dunn's brief, and she mentions it only once or twice, but it is worth recalling that her history was played out against a physical Oxford that was very different from ours. The Clarendon Hotel was still in Cornmarket; the picturesque Fisher Row was by Castle Mill Stream; according to Betjeman George Street still had 'country cottages'; and where the horrid New Bodleian now is there were 13 beautiful and picturesque houses, including the pub 'The Coach and Horses', opposite the King's Arms. Yeats lived in one of them for a time (No. 45), before he moved to 4 Broad Street – since demolished to be replaced by the Boswell Building (1927).

Bowra said, and he was quite right, that Yeats's 'All Souls' Night' (1920) is 'probably the finest poem ever written in Oxford.' No. 4 is described in letter to Lady Gregory as 'such a house as I love, all harmonious and severe, nothing looking expensive or too cheap but a dignified natural house for intellectual people'. (11 Oct 1919). It's a pity that W.A. Pantin arrived in Oxford too late for him to record it, and I have not been able to find a photograph. The poem was generally available to the public in *The Tower* (1928), the year after the house it was written in was torn down. There is an article by W.A. Pantin on the Broad Street houses in *Oxoniensis II* (1937), where he says, 'The history of minor domestic architecture in this country, at any rate in the towns, is largely a martyrology.' He also says, 'These old houses deserve to be studied as systematically and as seriously, as if they were something excavated at Ostia or Knossos or Ur.'



Houses in Broad Street. Yeats lived in No. 45 in 1918 – the tall house to the left of the Antiques Show Room.

Incidentally, Broad Street is now disfigured by the installation of plants where they have no business – and it is a fantastic waste of money at £500,000. We shall never again experience the delightful zen emptiness enjoyed by Jude Fawley, Zuleika Dobson, W.B. Yeats and the bright young things in their Oxford bags.



Broad Street in a state of Zen-like emptiness, with Oxford bags.

For older readers this Oxford Dunn describes is close rather than ancient history. She, for instance, recalls the remote days when undergraduate vehicles were required to sport green lights (p. 144). My friend Graham Richards records the following incident in the Birkenhead Tunnel, when a policeman spotted one on his Lambretta:

'What's that green light son?'

'I am an Oxford student and we have to have one.'

'You are not in fucking Oxford now son.'

He then ripped off the light, wrecking the electrics, and Graham had to push the scooter out of the tunnel.

BERNARD RICHARDS

'Sicilian Vespers' at La Scala, 17 February 2023



Firstly, a big thank you to everyone who signed Bryn Terfel's petition protesting the removal of Arts Council England's grant to English National Opera. The decision has been temporarily reversed, with a grant to be made for 2023-4, pending a fuller review of the options available. Whilst this may only be a stay of execution, it does sound that there will be a more rigorous examination of choices (including some market research) than perhaps occurred at the time of the original decision. Watch this space, and keep those fingers firmly crossed.

More positively, it was wonderful to be back at La Scala for the first time in 3 years; somewhat poignant too in that I believe we saw the theatre's last performance before the surge of Covid cases in Northern Italy caused it to close its doors. The world has changed so much since then, but I can report that La Scala has retained its undeniable magic: both in the outstanding quality

of its musical production and the grandeur of the theatre itself (sadly, patrons' inability to form an orderly queue in the interval is similarly unchanged!).

Verdi's 'Sicilian Vespers' was written for the Great Exhibition in 1855, first performed at the Paris Opera and was originally sung in French, although Italian lyrics were produced for performances in Italy (and were used in our production). The story is set in 13th century Sicily at a time when it was ruled by the French, albeit with a strong local independence movement (so overtones of the contemporary movement for the Reunification of Italy). Leading figures in the revolt are the Duchess Elena, whose brother was executed by order of the French Governor, de Montfort, Procida and Arrigo, who is in love with Elena. She agrees to marry him if he will avenge her brother. However, de Montfort has only recently learned that Arrigo is his illegitimate son and wishes to be reconciled with him.

A plot to kill de Montfort at a ball is foiled when Arrigo warns his newly found father of the threat leading to the arrest of Procida and Elena, who are both condemned to death. Both hate Arrigo for this until he explains to Elena his unfortunate birthright. He then intercedes on their behalf and de Montfort grants mercy upon Arrigo calling him 'father' for the first time. Procida sees the wedding of Arrigo and Elena as an opportunity for the rising, but Elena learns of this and tells Arrigo she cannot go ahead with the marriage. This is overruled by de Montfort, who sees this as a chance for peace in the land. The wedding takes place at Vespers, and as the church bells ring out, the revolt is unleashed.

Argentine Director Hogo de Ana's production is set in WW2 Sicily, with the 'French' being represented by American GIs. The wartime feel is reinforced by the use of monochrome sets and costumes, as well as the use of 'tableaux' (Act 1 has the soldiers and locals milling around an anti-aircraft gun, Act 2 has a tank looming menacingly over ruins and protagonists), all reminiscent of second world war photographs. In Act 3 the American overlords oversee the locals from a gantry over the stage. The sense of making the audience feel it was under an occupying force was reinforced, very effectively in my view, by having the anti aircraft gun fire, emitting smoke, and then traverse the entire stage with the gun pointing at the audience. The colours change in the last act, with the impending marriage. Elena wears a white shawl, her supporters are dressed in white, the tree is full of white blossom. Then the church bells ring, the explosion goes off, and everything goes orange as the insurgents swarm on to the stage brandishing their rifles.

The singing was first class. Elena (Marina Rebeka) has a role to showcase her vocal range and this she did well. I enjoyed her 'rabble rousing' song in the first Act when picked upon by the GIs. However, I thought her acting tended to be very static

and it was only in the last act that I believed she really loved Arrigo. I liked baritone Roman Burdenko's de Montfort, both his voice and his interpretation of a tyrant seeking to connect with a newly discovered son. The characterisation of Simon Lim's Procida was excellent, he is single minded in his pursuit of the revolt, chiding Elena for her sentiment and reminding her of her brother's memory. I also liked tenor Matteo Lippi's Arrigo, whose role is much more nuanced, having to convey both his love for Elena, his role as a patriot and his ambivalent feelings towards his father. Both he and Elena are emotionally conflicted. Lippi's performance was particularly impressive given that he was a late stand in for the indisposed Piero Pietti. The chorus was outstanding, whether the GIs baiting the locals, or the Sicilians smouldering resentment of the invader. Chorus master Alberto Malazzi had a very warm reception at the

final curtain.

Conductor Fabio Luisi kept a first class tempo all evening, with the orchestra's execution of the overture putting a marker down for the evening. I particularly appreciated the crispness of the timpani, creating that essentially martial feel. The balance between orchestra, singers and chorus was very good too, something which does not always occur even in top opera houses.

For me, the highlight was in Act IV, with the typical Verdi technique of having each of the four main protagonists on stage, all singing at the same time, and all with slightly different agendas. I also enjoyed the duet in Act III when de Montfort reveals to Arrigo that he is his father, with the consequent mixed emotions for Arrigo and allowing the audience to see a different side of de Montfort.

I thoroughly enjoyed the performance. The omission of the half hour ballet scene

in Act III was a good call by the director, and kept the production's focus on the central characters. Having said which, the chorus was excellent, and the dark austere set highly evocative, finishing with the sharp contrast in the last Act, first to white and finally to orange. Orange also causes one to think of the Orange Revolution, and the way the audience is made to feel the oppression of an occupying force leaves me wondering whether there is more than a passing reference to the current situation in the Ukraine. I was also left wondering how close to home the portrayal of the American invasion of Sicily was; those events took place in my father's generation, so not so long ago. In conclusion, it was wonderful to be back at La Scala, and as with all good productions, left us plenty to talk about on the way home.

T.J.N. WICKENS

Not
the
Gazette

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The next issue of *Oxford Magazine* will appear in second week

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